

"Old House"  
Adams National Historic Site  
Quincy, Massachusetts

HABS- MASS-615

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Eastern Office Design and Construction  
120 South Third St., Philadelphia 6, Pa.

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS...

"Old House"  
Adams National Historic Site  
135 Adams Street  
Quincy, Massachusetts

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Owner -

U. S. Government, National Park Service

Date of Erection -

West front 1731 - (no documentation)  
West ell front part 1788 - Letters of Mrs. Adams  
Back 30 ft. of west ell 1869 - Adams, Henry, see reference  
East front 1797-1800 - Letters of Mrs. Adams  
Back corridor 1836 - Adams, op. cit.

Architect -

Builder -

For 1788 and 1800 additions - Mr. Bates.

Materials -

First building, brick ends. Fronts of wood. All additions of wood. Cellars stone and brick.

Present Condition -

Good, but needing usual maintenance repairs.

References -

Old-Time New England, July 1928.  
"The Adams Mansion, Home of John and John Quincy Adams,"  
by Henry Adams.

Letters of Mrs. Adams.

Architectural Description -

Date of viewing - July 1955.

Layout - U-shaped with longest dimension on bottom,  
short side to East and long ell to West.

Over-all dimensions -

Front 79'9 1/2"

East side 32 1/2'

West side 69'

Back or south - East ell 31'6" West ell 24'4 1/2"

Central portion 24'11"

The original Vassall House was 49'6"x17'.

28' high (and a 5 ft. chimney) - ground floor 10',  
second floor 9', attic 7'.

Construction - The two end walls of the original building  
are of brick. The front and back walls are frame.  
All the additions are frame.

Cost - John Adams on September 26, 1787, paid £600 to  
Leonard Vassall Borland for seven parcels of land  
amounting to 75 acres. The first parcel was a  
7-acre tract including the Old House. The old  
deed is still in the possession of the family  
according to Henry Adams, op. cit.

Elevations -

Front (south).

2 1/2 stories.

Wall covered with clapboard.

Nine windows on ground floor, all 3'x5' 12-light  
sash windows.

Door at left of old building of 1731 framed by  
pilasters with impost block. 5-light transom  
over door. 9-paned door.

Door at right, with plain-knead architrave,  
8 panels, 4 small, 4 large.

Porch added in 1800. Called a Portico by Mrs. Adams.

Rebuilt later by Brooks Adams. Five columns - modillion  
cornice.

Second floor, nine 12-light windows 3'x5' and one  
small window at left.

Shutters on all the windows save those under the porch.  
Five ridge dormers in gambrel roof covered with slate,  
12-light sash windows and shutters. There are three  
brick chimneys at either end and where the wall of  
the first house was.

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Rear (north).

2 1/2 stories and stone cellar.

The rear elevation presents an irregular front.

At the left there is the end of the 1800 addition with a door at the right and two 24-light windows. The second floor has three 12-light windows with shutters.

The top half-story under the gambrel roof has two small 12-light windows with shutters. All windows have projecting lintels with moldings.

The central portion is the north wall of the passage addition by John Quincy Adams of 1836. There is an entrance to the cellar, a simple batten door and 2 windows to the right, one over the other. The ground floor window has 18 lights and shutters. The upstairs window has 12 lights and shutters. Both windows have plain trim.

The right-hand portion is the end of the kitchen ell. This wall was erected in 1869. There are two cellar windows with shutters. Two windows on each floor, each with 12 lights and shutters. A chimney rises at the ridge of the gambrel roof.

#### Right Elevation (East)

The elevation of the 1800 wing has an interesting roof line which attempted to copy the roof line of the original portion of the house. There is a gambrel running East and West and from the ridge a higher gambrel running North at right angles. The roof is covered with slate and has brick chimneys.

On the ground floor there are two french windows which were added by John Quincy Adams when a porch was added on the East. This porch was removed by Brooks Adams when he tried to return the house to its original form. These french windows have lintels with plain ornamental blocks at the corners.

The upper windows date from 1800 with molded trim, shutters and 12-light sash windows. Two are in the second floor and a smaller one is in the third floor under the gambrel end. There is a ridge dormer window with a 6-over-6-light sash window.

The East elevation of the kitchen wing had no openings in the early part of 1788. Its end is marked by granite coping. A brick chimney is at the end.

The 1869 addition of 22'9" has on the East elevation a 4-panel door on the ground floor with a small porch. There is also a 12-light window on the ground floor with shutters. There are two windows on the second floor and two ridge dormers in the side of the gambrel roof.

#### Left Elevation (West)

2 1/2 stories.

Basement stone laid in mortar. Under the old house the stones are smaller (but fairly uniform) than under the 1788 ell where much larger and better cut stones are used. Under the last addition of 1869 the stones are smaller and more uneven in size.

The west end of the original building, which is of brick, laid in common bond.

The windows reflect the Statute of George I which stated that windows could be flush with the wall if a relieving brick arch was used above the lintel. All four of the windows, two on the ground floor and two on the upper floor, have these brick relieving arches. The wide brick chimney is 5'10" wide and has an openwork top with granite coping and a cast iron chimney within.

The 1788 ell which is 26'6" long is of wood with siding and a slate roof. Two windows are on the south side on each story each with 12 lights.

The 1869 addition is in keeping with the 1788 addition but has a 4-panel door at the south end with a porch, which was added at this time as all the porches were, and two windows on each floor.

#### Interior -

##### Basement

Only a small part of the basement under the SW room is excavated. The east room of the old part is excavated. There is a basement under the 1788 and 1800 additions and a complete cellar under the 1869 addition.

Ground Floor -

The original building had a central hall with a dog-legged staircase. The 1797-1800 addition has a through hall and a flyer staircase on the west and a room with a fireplace on the east with storage space on the north.

The 1836 addition of a straight passage connects the 1800 addition and the 1788 ell which is composed of two storage closets, a pantry and a kitchen. The 1869 addition includes a through hall and flyer stairs and a laundry with a large fireplace in the north wall.

The San Domingo mahogany paneling was originally waxed and polished as was customary in the 18th century. John Adams, after his stay in France, where the airy and light Louis XVI style was in vogue, felt the room too dark and old-fashioned, so he had the wood painted white and two windows let into the west wall on either side of the fireplace.

The fireplace in the 1731 mahogany room has a bolection molding.

In 1888 the fireplace in the east room of the old house was made fashionable and a Roman brick fireplace with terra cotta molding and a wide mantel was added. In the 1800 room there is a mantel with a shelf.

Stairs -

In the 1731 house the stairs are dog-legged, that is, return before reaching the second floor. The balusters are turned with a columnette above and 2 urns.

The stairs in the Long Hall are flyers, that is, go straight to the second floor. They have plain square balusters.

Second floor -

The west bedroom has oak beams. Sadler and Wells tiles have been let in about the fireplace. The fireback dated 1788 was put in by John Quincy Adams in 1836 when he was remodeling. The date was in honor of his father's purchase of the house.

The fireplace in the center bedroom has a bolection molding and Sadler and Wells tiles added in 1801.

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A door was cut through the brick wall into the upper hall of the 1800 addition. Two doors with brass hardware enter into the Study, which, like the room below, has two storage closets at the north.

The bedrooms in the west ell, as well as the attic bedrooms, are very simple.

#### History -

There is no documentation that I have seen for the 1731 date of the original house. Abigail Adams' letters document the 1788 and 1797-1800 additions. Henry Adams' dating is used for the 1836 and 1869 additions.

Mrs. Adams, in a letter of July 7, 1788, wrote, "But we have come into a house but half repaired, and I own myself sadly disappointed. In height and breadth it looks like a wren's house."

This readily explains why a kitchen ell was added immediately, and during 1797-1880 the east ell was added to provide a larger parlor and a study for John Adams upstairs.

The house has had only three owners, the Vassall family, the Adams family, and the Federal Government.

John Adams bought the house from the grandson of the builder in 1788. The Adamses lived in the house from then until 1926, when Brooks Adams died. The family formed the Adams Memorial Society to care for and show the house in 1927. In 1946, the National Park Service took it over. On November 26, 1952, the name was changed to the Adams National Historic Site.

#### Architectural Significance -

It shows the difference in size demanded by people of moderate wealth in 1731 and 1800.

It shows an attempt in 1797 to fit the additions with the original 1731 building so that it would present a harmonious whole.

#### Historical Events Connected With Structure

John Adams, second President of the United States, died in the house on July 4, 1826.

Lafayette visited the house in 1824.

John Quincy Adams, sixth President, spent much time here.

Henry Adams, author of Mont St. Michel and Chartres, passed his childhood summers here.

January 21, 1958

Agnes A. Gilchrist  
HABS-EODC  
National Park Service



Adams Mansion  
(Vassall House, Old House)  
135 Adams Street  
Adams National Historic Site  
Quincy  
Norfolk County  
Massachusetts

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Addendum to:  
"Old House"  
Adams National Historic Site  
Quincy  
Norfolk County  
Massachusetts  
as recorded in the 1950s

PHOTOGRAPHS

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National Park Service  
Department of Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127